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TAGS: PGOV PINR XL
SUBJECT: St. Kitts and Nevis Labor Party Wins Historic Fourth
Consecutive Victory

CLASSIFIED BY: D. Brent Hardt, Charge d'Affaires a.i., State; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The St. Kitts and Nevis Labor Party (SKNLP) won six of the eight seats available to them in the Federal Elections on St. Christopher, giving them a majority of the seats in the federal parliament for an unprecedented fourth consecutive term. Opposition People's Action Movement (PAM) Leader Lindsay Grant lost his election bid, and only two PAM candidates won their seats. Despite the lopsided victory, many observers say the results are better viewed as a PAM loss, rather than a Labor victory. Concerned Citizens Movement (CCM) Leader Mark Brantley, whose Nevis-based party won two of the three seats contested on the smaller member of the confederation, described the election as a reflection on the weakness of PAM's candidates and poor decisions by its leadership, adding that PM Douglas remains unpopular even in his own party. Brantley and others are predicting a vote of no confidence soon after the new parliament meets for official business. End summary.

Election Day -- SKNLP Wins Historic Fourth Victory

¶2. (C) The hotly contested January 25 general elections were decided by two key issues: the stratospheric rise in violent crime and a perceived lack of professionalism and leadership from the PAM's slate of candidates, according to local lawyer and landholder Charlie Wilkins. The SKNLP won six of the eight seats available on the island of St. Christopher, giving them six of the eleven seats in the federal parliament -- one less than the 2004 election. The People's Action Movement captured two seats, but saw party leader Lindsay Grant lose his bid for election. On Nevis, the Concerned Citizens Movement returned both of its candidates to the federal government, as did the Nevis Reform Party, which won the final seat for Nevis.

¶3. (C) Both St. Kitts-based political parties were active on election day, holding rallies long into the night. Despite almost continuous rainfall and wait times approaching two hours, voters were patient and eager to exercise their franchise. Voter turnout in some districts was over 80 percent, which was significantly higher than the 59 percent turnout for the 2004 election. OAS and CARICOM observers agreed that there were no major irregularities on the day of the vote and the elections were held in a generally free and fair manner. However, there were complaints, particularly from the PAM, about irregularities prior to the elections. PAM candidate Lindsay Grant claims that Labor had its voters register in his district to guarantee his loss at the polls -- given that he lost by a scant 29 votes there may be some validity for his claims. Officials on both sides readily admitted that expatriate voters were flown in on charter flights, largely from the United States,

to vote. Estimates ranged from 900-1000 for the number of expatriates flown in to vote, which is roughly 4-5 percent of the total electorate. CCM member and re-elected MP Vance Amory told us that, while the practice is technically legal, it obviously had an effect on the outcome, given that the SKNLP had much more money available for these flights. We counted four Boeing-737 charter planes parked at the airport on the Sunday before the election, all of which were gone by the Tuesday after the election.

PAM Loss Self-Inflicted

¶4. (C) The PAM did not have the positive showing that many had

predicted going into the elections. The people of St. Kitts and Nevis are largely disaffected with the leadership of the PM and the Labor Party, but PAM's weak leadership cost them the election, David Brantley maintained. The slate of PAM candidates was young and inexperienced. Many of the rallies and debates were held live on the radio and the people could hear a qualifications gap between the two sides, he added. Many of the candidates for PAM and for the (Nevis-based) NRP were not college-educated professionals and it showed in their speeches and the way they framed the issues.

¶5. (C) Harvard-educated PAM leader Lindsay Grant, the most educated and polished of the PAM candidates, lost his advantage after a video appeared on YouTube showing him engaged in a backroom deal to sell land at a discount to a foreign developer for a kickback. Grant was able to play damage control by releasing the video to the media prior to its public release and spun it as a political set-up. The damage was done, however, as the SKNLP successfully used the issue to paint Grant as lacking the proper judgment to serve as prime minister. Radio call-in shows after the election abounded with voters who said that it was the PAM's lack of leadership and experience that made them vote Labor back to power for the fourth straight time.

PAM to Challenge the Results in Court

¶6. (C) The day after the election, PAM announced that they would be challenging the results of three constituencies based upon the legitimacy of some of the votes counted. PAM leader Lindsay Grant has long contended that the SKNLP was moving voters from safe districts to swing PAM districts in order to ensure victory. St. Kitts and Nevis law stipulates that voters should vote in the district in which they reside. Pre-election challenges were made against 60 names on the voters list in Mr. Grant's constituency, and Grant maintains that those voters were illegally allowed to remain on the list. Given that he lost by only 29 votes, Grant feels confident that he will win if the courts strike the 60 contested votes from the voter list in his constituency. [Note: Traditionally, courts in the Caribbean are loath to change the outcome of general elections due to judicial challenges, however, in 1979 PAM candidate Kennedy Simmonds overturned a loss to his SKNLP challenger with the aid of a court supervised recount.]

Prime Minister in Trouble?

¶7. (C) The Prime Minister took a decidedly conciliatory tone in his victory speech, calling for members of the PAM and SKNLP to come together to serve the people. Douglas spent a considerable amount of his speech praising the hard work of the PAM and singled out Grant for unusual praise, given the ferocity of the attacks made by both sides during the campaign. "The PM was gracious because he had to be," David Brantley said. Despite this public tone, the PM was working behind the scenes to find a way to prevent one of the two opposition MP's from being sworn in because of their U.S. citizenship. He had his Permanent Secretary contact the Embassy in an attempt to verify the individual's citizenship status. The Charge advised the PermSec that the individual should be able to provide information on his citizenship status directly

to the government.

¶18. (C) The PM is not well liked even in his own party, and has been accused by some SKNLP MP's of being dictatorial, he added. CCM's Amory told us that he expects a no-confidence vote against the PM early into the new parliamentary session and would not be

surprised if Douglas was replaced by someone else in his party -- most people believe that FinMin Timothy Harris is the strongest contender. For his part, Harris has proclaimed strong support for the PM and his leadership going forward and expects everyone will be happy with the fourth consecutive victory for the party.

Crime is Still "The" Issue

¶19. (C) There have been three murders since the beginning of the New Year, which puts St. Kitts on pace for the dubious distinction of one of the murder capitals of the world for the third year in a row on a per capita basis. "It is simply unfathomable that a country as small as St. Kitts and Nevis (SKN) could have so many murders and nothing is being done about it," CCM's Brantley lamented. "The number one, two and three issue in SKN is crime," he added. The government of Dr. Douglas has not been able to address the crime issue and now it is starting to spill over to the tourism sector, which will devastate the local economy. "It is incumbent upon the government to do something about this issue and if the PM is not up to the job then we in the parliament need to find someone who is," he said.

Comment

¶10. (C) Despite taking a majority of seats and winning the government for a fourth time, the PM looks to be in danger of losing his post to someone else in his party if he is not capable of finding some solution to the very real violent crime problem. While many in the other parties would like to see Douglas lose a no-confidence vote, it appears unlikely that he will face such a dilemma in the near-term. A revolt within the party so close after a victory would be risky, even for popular and entrenched Labor party MPs like Harris. If crime continues to worsen or spills over into the tourism sector; however, Douglas could face a no confidence vote, which he would likely lose.

HARDT